

モームが見るアジアの顔 —*Far Eastern Tales* 及び *More Far Eastern Tales* の 短編集を通して—

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On Somerset Maugham's Portraits of Asia —Comments on *Far Eastern Tales* and *More Far Eastern Tales*—

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要 旨

この論文では、モームの「ファー・イースト物語」と「続ファー・イースト物語」という二編の短編小説に見られるアジアの人々やその生活の描写の仕方について考察する。批評家の中には、これらの小説が、その登場人物である白人やその生活を不当に「悪く」描写していると非難している者がいる。この論文では、そのような主張は行き過ぎたものでありことを検証していく。むしろ、モームは、これらの小説に登場する人々の表情、服装、行動を実際に体験し、それを生き生きと描写し、その結果、これらの読む読者に感嘆の念を与えてくれるのである。本稿では、第一節の序論の後、第二節でモームとアジアの関係について簡単に言及し、第三節では、モームのこれらの短編小説に対する批判とその妥当性について検証して行く。

I. Introduction

William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) was criticized for telling in detail what some considered to be the sordid goings on of the towns and villages of the Federated Malay States and neighboring countries, and by portraying the features and characters of the protagonists to almost exact detail. In other words, he disgraced the

many expatriates in whose houses he was welcomed. To the critics who described him as being too direct and indiscreet, Maugham wrote in the preface to *The Complete Short Stories Volume 1—East and West*: “none of us is liked by everybody¹⁾.” In the same article, Maugham goes on to remind us that “the imagination can create nothing out of the void²⁾,” and that many great writers, such as Charles Dickens and Sir Walter

Scott, used family and friends as the basis of characters in their works. At the same time, he tells us that “the model a writer chooses is seen through his own temperament and if he is a writer of any originality what he sees need have little relation with the facts³⁾.” He includes an example of how he used a British Consul of Spain to form the character for the Resident in the story “The Outstation,” but was later told how the Resident in Sarawak at the time was totally offended. Maugham suggests that humans are apt to recall the less-favorable attributes of others, and are therefore wont to make inappropriate comparisons.

Notwithstanding these critics, Maugham’s short stories are extremely entertaining and his portraits, in particular, lucid.

II. Maugham Abroad

Maugham was a particularly prolific writer of the early twentieth century. Born in Paris to British parents, he studied in both England and Germany. Unlike his family where lawyers predominated, he studied medicine. Maugham took up writing while still at university, and published his first novel, set in the slums of London where he did his internship, in 1897.

During the First World War, Maugham served in the ambulance corps, but although he did not continue in the field of medicine, we can presume that his experiences were helpful in his vocation as a professional writer. Maugham enjoyed travelling and during his long life he travelled widely throughout Europe, the Pacific, and Asia. A novel he wrote after doing some research in Tahiti, *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), proved to be one of his most popular works, and “Rain,” a short story

set on the island of Pago Pago, is also still lauded as one of his best short stories.

A year after his visit to the Pacific, Maugham passed briefly through Tokyo on his way to Russia. However, it was not until the 1920s that he began visiting China, the Malay States (as they were called then), Burma, and Singapore, along with other Asian countries. In 1938, he travelled extensively in India⁴⁾.

III. Tales of the Far East

As Noel Coward states in the forward of Garson Kanin’s *Remembering Mr. Maugham*, Maugham’s short stories are “the most dazzling jewels in his crown⁵⁾,” and the two compilations being looked at in this paper each contains ten short stories. Nearly all of these stories, set in different Asian locations, appeared first in magazines such as the *Cosmopolitan*, before appearing in short collections, such as *The Casuarina Tree* (1926). All but “The Buried Talent” have also appeared in either *The Complete Short Stories, Volume I — East and West* or *The Complete Short Stories, Volume II — The World Over*. (cf. Appendix)

In the British magazine, *New Statesman*, the literary critic and writer, Cyril Connolly, described Maugham as “the greatest living short-story writer⁶⁾.” Cordell reiterates that, although his vivid characters sometimes caused anger and embarrassment amongst the people who remained in the British communities, Maugham’s short stories continue to be praised for their intricate and often unpredictable plots⁷⁾.

This paper wishes to review some of the many portraits Maugham made of the people he met: the expatriates from England and other western

countries, the natives, and the Eurasians of mixed blood. My research targets descriptions of facial features and dress as well as character. Where other writers, such as Hemmingway, like to allow the reader to make up their own visual picture of the hero or heroine, Maugham likes to have his stories complete in every way.

At the time of Maugham's travels, England and France had political control of many territories in Asia. In particular, Britain still retained much power over what is now Malaysia, Borneo, and Myanmar, with the capital at Singapore. Federated states were governed by Resident Councilors, while the Unfederated Malay States had British advisors. As for China, only a decade had passed since it had ended its long Qing Dynasty and had become a republic. It was not yet stable. In the meantime, Japan was gaining power after the energetic Meiji Period where Japan had been eager to come to a par with western learning and society.

Looking at other parts of the globe, America came into the glorious Roaring Twenties era, while many European countries suffered from inflation after the First World War. The 1920s was not an easy time for most Asians living outside of Asia, either. In America, interracial marriages were forbidden by law, and many Asians, including Japanese, were not lawfully allowed to take up American citizenship⁸⁾. Britain, on the other hand, did not prohibit interracial marriages, but there still did seem to be a stigma against non-white spouses⁹⁾.

Maugham's stories have been criticized as focusing on the expatriates, yet it is highly likely that expatriates were indeed the bulk of his acquaintances while in Asia.

IV. A Collage of Portraits

"Maugham had a sharp eye for the strange and beautiful," says Cordell¹⁰⁾ although we are told elsewhere that he had 'received' three of the stories included here. Maugham also was adept at showing how inept some exiled Europeans were at living in the tropics. Drinking seems to have been a major (health) problem; loneliness and/or a wish to return to the homeland (England) did not make for domestic bliss; and women were often portrayed as carving out their own independence apart from their husbands. Within the pages of the *Far Eastern Tales* series, we are introduced to Englishmen and their wives, missionaries, and native men and women. Their characters range from the elite to roughians, from people who continually stood over the natives to those who mingled with them, from those who flourished in the tropics to those who wasted away; among them there were many who beg our sympathy.

1. Tales from Asia

There are ten short stories in the *Far Eastern Tales* volume, and settings include both city streets as well as plantations bordering jungles, as with the first story: "Footprints in the Jungle." In this story, Maugham gives a lengthy description of Mrs. Cartwright:

She was a woman somewhere in the fifties (though in the East, where people age quickly, it is difficult to tell their ages), with white hair very untidily arranged, and a constant gesture with her was an impatient movement of the hand to push back a long wisp of hair that kept falling over her forehead. ... Her blue eyes were large, but pale and a little tired; her face was lined and sallow; I think it was her mouth that

gave it the expression which I felt was characteristic of caustic but tolerant irony. You saw that here was a woman who knew her mind and was never afraid to speak it. ... Her large, thin mouth broke into a dry smile and her eyes shone brightly when by a lucky chance you brought off a repartee that turned the laugh against her.

I thought her a very agreeable person. I liked her frankness I liked her quick wit. I liked her plain face. ... It was not only her head that was untidy, everything about her was slovenly; she wore a high-necked silk blouse, but for coolness had unbuttoned the top buttons and showed a gaunt and withered neck. ... I saw that her blue skirt was rather ragged at the hem. ... But none of this mattered. Everything she wore was perfectly in character. (*FET* 3-4)¹¹⁾

By the end of the story we learn that Mrs. Cartwright had organized the death of her former husband so she could give birth to Mr. Cartwright's child. Maugham portrays a woman who has the determination to win what she desires. Although this case goes to the extreme, there were many women, no doubt, who grew strong, simply because they needed to be, in order to cope with the rough life style.

Maugham's stories tend to jump between elegant European scenes, often depicted as being in the past, and the more down-to-earth scenes set in Asia, often depicted as in the present. The heroine of "The Buried Talent" has changed much over the years, but still wishes she could be commanding the stage as a singer:

"A big stout woman with grey hair came down the steps with outstretched hands... She had still the handsome dark eyes that he remembered, but a heavy jowl and bags under

the eyes; her skin was coarse and sallow. She wore a sort of tea-gown in white silk, and on her ample bosom hung three or four strings of coloured beads. She was an old woman." (*FET* 129-130)

Maugham's portrayal of the "old woman" is all the more poignant when juxtaposed against the memory of the vibrancy of her youth. Furthermore, the air of melancholy climaxes at the end with a note from her husband that tells that she committed suicide soon after the old friend had left.

Maugham was also a composer of plays¹²⁾, and in his short stories, he would show off his prowess with dialogue, such as in the story "Neil Mac-Adam", a story of a young botanist who tries to thwart advances from his boss' wife. Comments like the following carry the story: "'You really have a most lovely skin,' she said. 'It's as smooth as a woman's.'" (*FET* 125) But under Maugham's controlled pen, even not speaking is a topic for expression. In "Before the Party", Mr. Skinner, a solicitor, is at a loss for words when he hears that his daughter slashed her drunk husband's throat: "He fumbled, searching for the phrases that played at hide and seek in his scattered wits." (*FET* 173)

Indeed, many of the stories recount how drinking and gambling at the club become a part of the expat's life. The native inhabitants are usually servants, or temporary wives. In either role, the natives rarely have names. One such example is "The Force of Circumstance." Guy, who worked for the Sultan, is described as being "a jolly little man, who took nothing very solemnly, and he was constantly laughing. He made [Doris] laugh too. He found life an amusing rather than a serious business, and he had a charming smile."

Doris, his new bride, is described as looking “very cool and fresh in her linen frock. The heat did not distress her. She had no more than the prettiness of youth, though her brown eyes were fine; but she had a pleasing frankness of expression, and her dark, short hair was neat and glossy.” (*FET* 253) We are told she had the air of a confident secretary, and loved being in Asia, especially because of the joyous call of the birds and the lush environment. While it seems that Maugham is praising this person for being able to adapt to her host country and “understand” the situation of the men sent to work there, Maugham reminds us, through Doris, of the intolerance towards native spouses within the expat community. Then Doris sees two little boys in the village watching her. They are “much whiter than the others,” she tells her husband who seems to treat the statement lightly. She later sees their mother:

“She was slight and small, with the large, dark, starry eyes of her race and a mass of raven hair. ...Doris saw then that she was not quite so young as she had at first thought. Her features were a trifle heavy and her skin was dark, but she was very pretty.” (*FET* 256)

Along with Doris, the reader soon learns that this woman was Guy’s native “wife” up until Doris’ arrival. However, in spite of having this important role in the narrative, we are never told her name. It remains as “the girl” until the very end. When searching for a reason for this, we must remember that Maugham quite likely was not on familiar terms with the natives, and especially not a native woman of the country; and while the writer can only write what he is familiar with, the reader can only comprehend that of which he has some knowledge. Therefore, while Maugham would not have had a stock of common

Malay girls’ names, the reader of the era would not have felt the need to have a name put to the character.

Not all of Maugham’s characters were given distinct ethnic identities. The protagonist of “Mr Know-all” is a person called Max Kelada. We are only given a hint of his being a non-European. “Mr. Kelada was short and of a sturdy build, clean-shaven and dark-skinned, with a fleshy, hooked nose and very large, lustrous and liquid eyes. His long black hair was sleek and curly. He spoke with a fluency in which there was nothing English and his gestures were exuberant.” (*FET* 177) Although he professed to be British, “a closer inspection of that British passport would have betrayed the fact that Mr. Kelada was born under a bluer sky than is generally seen in England” we are told. Later, Mr. Kelada flashes “an oriental smile” at the story’s narrator, but we are told no more about his ethnic roots. In this way, we may surmise that Maugham did not discriminate cruelly between the white and non-white community, yet gave the readership an insight into the various ethnic groups that made up the population of these outposts.

2. More Tales from Asia

The opening story in *More Far Eastern Tales*, “The Letter,” is one of the few stories where Maugham not only gives his oriental character a name, but also praises his ability. In this story, Ong Chi Seng, the Cantonese clerk of a local lawyer, is described as “very neat in his white ducks¹³⁾” and was “industrious, obliging, and of exemplary character.” He also “spoke beautiful English, accenting each word with precision.” (*MFET* 1-2)¹⁴⁾ However, strangely enough, although Ong Chi Seng’s fashion sense is mentioned later in the story, and the lawyer has “a

very high opinion of [his] legal acumen,” (*MFET* 29) Maugham has trouble defining his facial features or body build. Could this lack of elaboration be explained by the fact that this story was a legacy from a fellow countryman?¹⁵⁾

Contrast the lack of detail about Ong Chi Seng with the description of Norman Grange, a rubber plantation owner in the story “Flotsam and Jetsam” set in Borneo:

“Grange had just come in from his round of the estate and wore dirty shorts, a khaki shirt open at the neck and an old, battered terai hat¹⁶⁾. He looked as shabby as a beachcomber. He took off his hat to wipe his sweating brow; he had close-cropped grey hair; his face was red, a broad fleshy face, with a large mouth under a stubble of grey moustache, a short, pug-nacious nose and small, mean eyes.” (*MFET* 138)

Mrs. Grange, we are told, had met her husband when she was in Singapore with a travelling theatre company.

“She wore a blue cotton dress, simple enough, but more suited to a young girl than a woman of her age; her short hair was tousled, as though on getting out of bed she had scarcely troubled to pass a comb through it, and dyed a vivid yellow, but badly, and the roots showed white. Her skin was raddled and dry, and there was a great dab of rouge on each cheekbone, put on however so clumsily that you could not for a moment take it for a natural colour, and a smear of lipstick on her mouth.” (*MFET* 140)

As the couple are too poor to spend much money on holidays away, Mrs. Grange frets that she shall never see England again. In this story, dialogue is again used to show the hierarchical

positions of station manager, wife, workers, and household helps, as well as showing the strain between the husband and his wife resulting from the wife’s affair with a neighbouring estate owner. Infidelity is an underlying theme in other stories as well, perhaps because of the harshness of the lifestyle, and the infrequency of interactions with other expatriates.

There is also the issue of identity. In “Flotsam and Jetsam,” Norman Grange was born and raised in the Federated Malay States, and England held nothing for him. Yet to the Malays and Chinese, he would remain a “white man” even though he could speak Malay and some Dyak dialects¹⁷⁾ as well as any native. (*MFET* 150) In an afterthought, Grange’s solution for men like himself was to marry a Malay woman.

This, however, was not in the mind of a protagonist in “The Yellow Streak.” On the contrary, Izzart, whose mother was a half-caste, was adamant that he would only consider having children with a white woman. (*MFET* 220) When considering how the Resident, Hutchinson, looked fondly at his own half-caste child, Izzart said to himself, “[The whites have] got no right to have them. [The half-caste children have] got no chance in the world.” (*MFET* 221) Not only does Izzart show embarrassment about his mixed-blood mother, he is also embarrassed about the Asian traits he was born with:

“He passed his hands reflectively along his bare and hairy legs. He shuddered a little. Though he had done everything he could to develop the calves, his legs were like broomsticks. He hated them. He was uneasily conscious of them all the time. They were like a native’s. Of course they were the very legs for a top-boot. In his uniform he had looked very

well. He was a tall, powerful man, over six feet high, and he had a neat black moustache and neat black hair. His dark eyes were fine and mobile. He was a good-looking fellow and he knew it, and he dressed well, shabbily when shabbiness was good form, and smartly when the occasion demanded. (*MFET* 221)

Through Izzart, Maugham repeats the criticism of the British towards the Eurasians; they were not to be trusted, they would invariably let you down sooner or later. (*MFET* 223) This unfair treatment, just because there was a drop of native blood in his veins made Izzart feel wretched, and made him try overly to please.

Towards his travel companion, Champion, a successful mining engineer whose work had taken him to various parts of the world, Izzart felt a certain reservation. Champion “was a little man with a big, bald head, and though certainly fifty, strong and wiry; he had quick shining blue eyes and a stubby, grey moustache.” (*MFET* 216) This coolness between Champion and Izzart slowly increases during the story until at the climax we have Izzart bending the truth slightly, and Champion asking that Izzart not speak ill him. When Izzart inquires why, he receives the words he most forebode: “the yellow streak.” (*MFET* 246)

The Resident, Mr. Warburton, in the story “The Outstation” saw Asia a little differently; that is, through the eyes of a benevolent administrator. The Resident was in the habit of dressing formally for dinner, no matter whether he was alone or entertaining a guest: “The only concession he made to the climate was to wear a white dinner-jacket; but otherwise, in a boiled shirt and a high collar, silk socks and patent-leather shoes, he dressed as formally as though he were dining at his club in Pall Mall.” (*MFET* 54) When asked

why he should always dress for dinner, the Resident replied, “When a white man surrenders in the slightest degree to the influences that surround him he very soon loses his self-respect, and when he loses his self-respect you may be quite sure that the natives will soon cease to respect him.” (*MFET* 55)

This did not mean that the Resident disliked his home in Borneo. On the contrary, he wanted to be buried near the softly flowing river, among the people he so loved. “I have never known finer gentlemen than some well-born Malays whom I am proud to call my friends,” he says. He praises their courtesy and manners, and their gentleness, yet he considered taking a native wife to be terribly undignified. (*MFET* 62–63) Maugham juxtaposes the calm and firm character of the Resident to a new man called Cooper, the complete opposite in personality. Cooper’s clothes are a little shabby; he does not like to dress formally for dinner; he was born in Barbados, and had spent time in Africa; and he felt that he knew how to handle the natives he calls “niggers”. Cooper’s crude ways, and the Resident’s snobbishness lead to a deep rift between them. Caught between the two men are Cooper’s servants, which, with the exception of a boy named Abas, Maugham continues to refer to by the jobs they do in and around the house. Being the nephew of Warburton’s own head-boy, Abas is treated kindly. Abas is described as being “a tall, slender youth of twenty.” He had “large dark eyes and a good profile. He was very neat in his sarong, a little white coat, and a fez, without a tassel, of plum coloured velvet.” We are also told that Abas comes from “a very good family.” (*MFET* 65)

The way Maugham contrasts the two men here is not dissimilar to those in other stories, yet we

have here a person who both loves the natives, but still feels that he cannot, or rather must not live as they do. Again, the main characters are whites and the natives are, status-wise, below the whites, and yet we cannot but admire the forthrightness of the boy, Abas. Maugham also makes us aware of the maltreatment of servants which was, no doubt, not an unusual event at the time of Maugham's visit.

Just as Abas is favoured because of his family status, so are the Sultan and his son dealt with differently in the story called "The Book-Bag":

"We were received by one of his sons, a shy, smiling youth who acted as his A.D.C. He was dressed in a neat blue suit, but round his waist he wore a sarong, white flowers on a yellow ground, on his head a red fez, and on his feet knobby American shoes. ... The Sultan came in with several attendants. He was a man of fifty, perhaps, short and stout, dressed in trousers and tunic of a large white-and-yellow check. Round his middle he wore a very beautiful yellow sarong and on his head a white fez. He had large handsome friendly eyes." (*MFET* 175)

We are told that the Sultan was very friendly and easy to talk to. One could say that Maugham was being very diplomatic here. It could very well be that Maugham met Sultans who were very affable, or it could be that Maugham, aware of Britain's situation in Asia, made a very conscious effort to deal with each character in accordance with their respective status.

V. In conclusion

In the opening paragraph of "The Letter", Maugham describes Singapore, the gateway to

Asia, as follows: "Singapore is the meeting-place of a hundred peoples; and men of all colours, black Tamils, yellow Chinks, brown Malays, Armenians, Jews and Bengalis, call to one another in raucous tones." (*MFET* 1)

In the story "P & O", he expands his observation to the following:

"Singapore is the meeting place of many races. The Malays, though natives of the soil, dwell uneasily in towns, and are few; and it is the Chinese, supple, alert and industrious, who throng the streets; the dark-skinned Tamils walk on their silent, naked feet, as though they were but brief sojourners in a strange land, but the Bengalis, sleek and prosperous, are easy in their surroundings, and self-assured; the sly and obsequious Japanese seem busy with pressing and secret affairs; and the English in their topees¹⁸⁾ and white ducks, speeding past in motor-cars or at leisure in their rickshaws, wear a nonchalant and careless air." (*FET* 44)

The number of short stories and novels which are set in Asia, and the number of times Maugham took the trouble to sail to this far-off region indicates that Maugham did very much enjoy his time within the raucous throng. Indeed, a number of stories enclosed in the two volumes being presented here were penned during his stay at Singapore's Raffles Hotel, hence the fact that one of the rooms there is now called the Maugham Suite.

Christine Doran states in her "Popular Orientalism: Somerset Maugham in Mainland Southeast Asia," that Maugham's presentation of the people in the Malay States was one of British imperialism in Asia, and had the effect of reinforcing the concept of British superiority. As, historically, that was the era, it was, no doubt, the Asia that

Maugham saw, and it was undoubtedly the content about which the audience wanted to read. Yet, it is important to realize that Maugham also saw the men who stayed in Asia as not just advocates of the Colonial Era, but also as western dropouts, misfits, and martyrs. With such a gamut of characters, we cannot deny the worth of the vivid images Maugham presents to us, and we cannot but praise his ability to observe, and then to record those observations so explicitly. Maugham is a true painter or portraits; his brush, his exquisite words.

Notes

- 1) *Selected Prefaces and Introductions*, p. 59.
- 2) *Ibid.* p. 56.
- 3) *Ibid.* p. 57.
- 4) In his *A Writer's Notebook*, Maugham includes many notes about various people he met in India and a number of places to which he visited.
- 5) Garson Kanin, *Remembering Mr Maugham*, forward
- 6) Richard Cordell, *Somerset Maugham-Biographical and Critical Study*, p. 138.
- 7) Cordell, p. 119.
- 8) "Timeline of Asian American History between 1920 and 1929."
- 9) Cf. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Yellow Face*, and note that Ernest Satow lived with a common law Japanese wife while in Japan, but did not return to England with her.
- 10) Cordell, p. 119.
- 11) Henceforth *FET* = *Far Eastern Tales*.
- 12) Maugham published 25 plays, and wrote many more.
- 13) Clothing, in particular, trousers made from strong "duck" (*doek*) cotton, similar to, but lighter than, canvas. The word still remains in Australian slang as "daks".
- 14) Henceforth *MFET* = *More Far Eastern Tales*.
- 15) *Selected Prefaces and Introductions*, p. 55.
- 16) A type of slouch hat worn by the Gurkha regiments of the former British Indian Army.
- 17) Dyak or Dayak are the native people of Borneo. The language is not one single language but a variety of 170 languages and dialects.
- 18) Another name for the popularly worn pith hat.

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Appendix 1

Stories in *Far Eastern Tales*

- Footprints in the Jungle 1927 *International Magazine*, 1934 *East and West*
- Mabel 1952 *The World Over*
- P & O 1926 *The Casuarina Tree*, 1934 *East and West*

- The Door of Opportunity 1931 *International Magazine*, 1934 *East and West*
 - The Buried Talent 1934 *International Magazine*
 - Before the Party 1926 *The Casuarina Tree*, 1934 *East and West*
 - Mr. Know-All 1924 *Good Housekeeping*, 1952 *The World Over*
 - Neil MacAdam 1932 *International Magazine*, 1934 *East and West*
 - The End of the Flight 1926 *Harper's Bazaar*, 1952 *The World Over*
 - The Force of Circumstance 1926 *The Casuarina Tree*, 1934 *East and West*
 - The Four Dutchmen, 1928 *International Magazine*, 1952 *The World Over*
 - The Outstation 1924 *International Magazine*, 1926 *The Casuarina Tree*, 1934 *East and West*
 - The Vessel of Wrath 1931 *International Magazine*, 1934 *East and West*
 - Flotsam and Jetsam 1952 *The World Over*
 - The Book-Bag 1934 *East and West*
 - Raw Material 1952 *The World Over*
 - The Yellow Streak 1925 *International Magazine*, 1926 *The Casuarina Tree*, 1934 *East and West*
 - Masterson 1952 *The World Over*
 - The Back of Beyond 1934 *East and West*
 - * *The Complete Short Stories, Volume I — East and West*
 - * *The Complete Short Stories, Volume II — The World Over*
- Stories from *More Far Eastern Tales*
- The Letter 1924 *International Magazine*, 1926 *The Casuarina Tree*, 1934 *East and West*